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ABSTRACT

In this paper William Stafford's varied descriptions and occasional judgments as to what it means to write a poem are gathered by prospecting through his essays, published lectures, and transcribed interviews. The paper describes Stafford's perspective on (1) the powerful language of poetry; (2) finding each poem's unique form; (3) practicing the process of making a poem; and (4) evaluating the poem. Looking at Stafford's writing process as an experiment in the open form, the paper argues that writing is discovery, not a plan: the process is more vital than the product. The paper concludes that Stafford is one of the "wild cards"--a wanderer out of the halls of "how to" into the wilderness of discovery. His purpose is not to trash tradition but to go beyond it. (RS)

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AN EXPLORATION OF WILLIAM STAFFORD'S WRITING PROCESS

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Poets are the "wild cards in any society" (Stafford, 1982c, 16) and when we ask today's poets, "What is a poem?" we may get a poem:

Report from a Far Place

Making these word things to
step on across the world, I
could call them snowshoes.

They creak, sag, bend, but
hold, over the great deep cold,
and they turn up at the toes.

In war or city or camp
they could save your life;
you can muse them by the fire.

Be careful, though: they
burn, or don't burn, in their own
strange way, when you say them.
(Stafford, 1977, 239)

In addition to an example of his own work, Stafford could recite a few lines from William Blake and discuss the poem as an open form for the writer. He could make a straight forward statement: "To me poetry is talk that's enhanced a little bit. It's a linguistic thing rather than something larger" (Stafford, 1970, 124). Later, he leans another way and says, "Poetry is a mirror of the nation, as well as the times" (Childress, 37). And in a rare flourish, he writes, "A poem is a serious joke, a truth that has learned ***jujitsu***" (Stafford, 1978, 3). He neither inscribes a single definition of poetry in granite nor does he ascribe to one.

While prospecting through William Stafford's essays, published lectures, and transcribed interviews, I have gathered his varied descriptions and occasional judgments as to what it means to write a poem. I will present Stafford's perspective on four aspects of writing a poem: first, the powerful language of poetry; second, finding form of poetry; third, practicing the process of making a poem; and fourth, evaluating the poem.

William Stafford often compares writing to swimming or surfing, and the water or ocean is always language. Language supports a writer as water supports a swimmer who relaxes and doesn't thrash around. But like a swimmer who has felt the deception of tides and currents, Stafford doesn't trust language completely. He takes a skeptical stance toward language. In the medium from which literature is made he doesn't expect to find "Truth" or "absolute reality." He thinks that what we know is "considerable," but what we can communicate is only an interior "felt truth," not an absolute. He confesses, "I cringe to realize that my own saying of my own kind of truth is hazardous at best. Language--others and my own--is very thin" (Stafford, 1978, 58). He does not love language, as Dylan Thomas did, but he attempts to discover what language can do within its limitations. What are language's powers?

Stafford carries a quotation from Petrarch, which stakes a claim for literature, filed in the fourteenth century. This quote echoes an explanation for why Aristotle's ethics

"'...was not apt to make the reader virtuous. Its lessons lacked the words that sting and enflame and spur on to love of virtue and scorn of vice.' Petrarch claimed literature produces experience beyond and above assertion and information" (Stafford, 1982b, 19). Petrarch's antique words support Stafford's idea that writers use "powerful language" to produce literature.

Our language usually lives an everyday life of information and assertion as it stumble-bumbles along, getting the job done. Sometimes the enthusiasm or conviction of a speaker or writer is enough to make language seem powerful. But "powerful language" occurs when someone is telling about something or asserting something and our language helps in the expressing, it performs as we inform. When this happens in prose, it is said to have a "poetic lift."

It is at this point that Stafford begins to separate the ore of poetry from the rock of literature. When the sound of a syllable within a word "reverberates with many other syllables in contexts that reinforce what the immediate word is doing, we have 'powerful language'" (Stafford, 1978, 59). This "sound reinforcement" surpasses the labels of assonance and alliteration which are usually applied to a single line of poetry. Stafford calls our attention to the fact that these "reverberations" are at work throughout the poem. "...any sounds anywhere in the poem, are never at rest: those sounds remain hanging in the

air, echoing or contrasting or sustaining one's momentum" (Miller, 58). The "contexts" Stafford mentioned seem to be a sequence of images that reinforce each other or the story of a narrative poem. These sequences or narrative "...touch into life a pattern in our feelings, a pattern not ordinarily roused by events that just happen, because what just happens is too random to bring about sustained feelings" (Stafford, 1978, 4).

Another "sound reinforcement" that helps in the expressing is the meaning embedded in the syllable's sounds. We easily recognize the shared meaning in a group like "skid, ski, skate, scat, skull, etc." and Stafford hears these sound reinforcements wherever they scamper into our language (1969, 82-3). He hears all syllables scoot toward certain meanings either because of the different physical demands made on the throat in pronunciation, or because sounds have been "loaded" with certain meanings by our culture. And he is seldom skunked. As a writer he rides these "currents" that are available in our language. But there is a paradox here: what will tomorrow make of today's words?

Although Stafford believes a poem is a reflection of today, he realizes that committing a poem to paper or memory insures its appearance tomorrow. A writer "entrusts" feelings and meanings to language which may violate those feelings and meanings in the future. Language begins to "distort" as soon as it is used; individual words begin to

"entice" readers or hearers into personal associations and tangential responses. But coming down on the positive side, Stafford sees the possibility that these "...distortions of language can reverberate into new experiences more various, more powerful, and more revealing than the experience that set off language in the first place" (1978, 60). These "distortions" add another dimension to the familiar concept of connotation and remind us what an important part luck plays in the process of poetry.

Another way our language helps in expressing the "contexts" is what Stafford calls "myth-residues," which set human experience "reverberating." "You don't have to try to put myths into poems. You'll be overwhelmed with them. You become overwhelmed by the strange images and associations that are generated as you write...the two words 'what if' are probably the source of all myths. And they are the source of poetry, too" (Jackson, 129). Stafford expands the common concept of allusion to identify "myth residues." His best example is his poem, "The Animal That Drank Up Sound." This poem is based on a native American legend about a creature who hides every sound in the landscape and leaves a scene of silence. Stafford relates an aborted attempt to read the poem in Iran, where the translator was afraid to speak this poem aloud (Jackson, 130). Because in a theocracy, the legend becomes political and the "animal" becomes the religious dictator.

What Stafford is saying in his discussion of sound and

"context" is first, word choice determines sound, and second, poems are made of "contexts," not just words. The individual words are important, but the sequence, the feeling or movement from image to image and the images' "reverberations" are more vital. If a poem achieves "flying speed" or has "momentum," this counterbalances any mistakes in word choice and welcomes any future change in meaning. "It's like running fast and your elbows and knees may not always be exactly right [word choice]...but you're really getting somewhere [contexts]. That's the sort of feeling writing a poem has" (Stafford, 1978, 123).

For Stafford, "Poetry is talk that's enhanced a little bit" (1970, 124). He notices that as we learn to talk, we are also learning poetry. "Poetry is not something that one begins to do, it is something everyone is caught up in early, and a few keep on doing" (Stafford, 1978, 48). He notices that when we talk, we naturally use poetic elements. We feel delight or dismay about the way our words come out, "...have lipsmacking realizations of differences in discourse" (Bunge, 115). These elements of poetry are our language's natural resources and poets thrive on these "...sleeping resources in language--connotations, sound reinforcements, allusions, myth-residues, and so on" (Stafford, 1966, 109). These ideas build on the theories of Paul Valery, who in the 1920's, noticed and described poetic "fragments" existing in every "product of language." Stafford's perceptions penetrate into the syllables, while

Valery uses a simple metaphor of musical and non-musical sounds. Valery also saw the impossibility of writing a "pure" or "absolute" poem (1960).

For Stafford, writing a poem is using our language's powerful natural resources to create "contexts" of verbal images where even the sounds of syllables help the expression. This communicative act goes beyond informing or asserting, the poet moves into discovery, finding the open form.

Stafford claims all his poems to be "found" poems. The words are found in the never before encountered moment of expression. They are discovered in an encounter with the language that is natural to the poet, rather than on box tops, traffic signs, advertisements, conversations, and the usual definition of found poetry is focused into the poet's mind. The form is developed to fit the particular context, and the images are found in life's possibilities. "One who composes in language confronts opportunities too varied for fixed rules: from the emergency of the encounter emerges the new realization, the now poem" (Stafford, 1978, 55). The "emergency of the encounter" is an answer to the question, What do I write next? The "rules" refer to any "how to" approach to poetry. Stafford utilizes the open form, like many American poets today. The twentieth century marks a migration of poets away form choosing a form, say a sonnet, and writing fourteen lines of iambic pentameter. The open form evolves with the writing. "Poems are games

you invent as you go along" (Stafford, 1982c, 16).

In Stafford's essay, "Whose Tradition?" he reacts to Robert Frost's accusation that an open form or free verse poem is "like playing tennis with no net." Stafford responds, "It is time to mention that poetry is not tennis, that there are games so important that nothing less than everything in your experience is sufficient to bring along for involvement" (1978, 77). The open form puts the entire responsibility of creation on the writer and opens the possibility of discovering new patterns that have power. Stafford invites us to imagine the first person who wrote a sonnet. How did they do it? Stafford's aim is not to shovel content into an accepted form, but to write like "Daniel Boon" exploring into Kentucky, finding something (Ellsworth, 97). Stafford does not rely on literary tradition alone. "It's got to be the whole forward gush and more of the language that swirls around us" (Stratton, 97). What has happened is "...each poem has its own net" (Stafford, 1978, 44).

What is writing a poem? Writing is discovery found in the experience of entering the language. It is not telling about something previously discovered, or asserting something one already believes. This kind of discovery is found by going forward rather than backward, created in the emergency of the moment, the now. The form is open rather than predetermined; it evolves with the expression rather than the expression being tailored to fit the form.

Stafford polishes the process of making a poem whenever he writes a poem.

Stafford's guide into the open form is a passage from William Blake's "Jerusalem:"

> I give you the end of a golden string,
> Only wind it into a ball,
> It will lead you in at heaven's gate
> Built in Jerusalem's wall.

This traditional closed form of metrical, symmetrical verse is Stafford's invitation into the "now poem." He follows the "golden string" of inner impulses as they sequentially come to him at the moment of writing. This spring of consciousness onto the page begins with whatever comes to mind as he "follows" on to the next thought, simultaneously suspending conscious critical considerations. "In writing the first draft I have the sense that the poem is coming, coming to me" (Stafford, 1982a, 25). And whatever comes; its only validation is that he thought of it. Here is a sequence that came to him one morning:

> When the wind ended and we came down
> it was grass all around. One of us found
> the dirt--it was rich, black and easy.
> When it rained, we began to grow, except
> two of us caught in leaves and unable to touch
> earth, which always starts things. By late June
> we sent our own off, just as we'd done, floating
> that wonderful wind that promises new land. Now
> spread low and flat, on this precious part of the world,
> but my dreams--where have they found? I wish
> them well.
>
> (Stafford, 1978, 66)

He wrote the preceding lines while the rest of the household slept, two of their four children were away at

college, and he looked out the window and noticed that he should weed their yard. The lines he wrote represent the impulses that sequentially came as he wound the "golden string into a ball." He acknowledges that the process does not always produce a poem, but he always continues writing until he loses interest. On this morning, he encountered a "context" or sequence of "particulars that reinforce each other--and in that case you have a poem" (Stafford, 1978, 120).

The poem that came that morning has a narrative "context" personifying a seed's migration: finding the dirt and sending off new seed or dreams with the wind. Stafford did not plan to write the cycle of a seed, or study an agronomy book to get it right. He began by having an experience in language, building the sequence with his experience of life and language at the moment of writing "When the wind ended and we came down."

Stafford has another metaphor describing his practice of writing that I believe describes aptly his process of "revising outward." The "golden string" changes to yarn and the writer becomes a spinner. "A person used to spinning would feel little patterns that are going through [their fingers]; they would feel it's more or less adequate as it goes and they would adjust as they went" (Miller, 59). This metaphor emphasizes feeling "little patterns" and adjusting the first draft while "revising outward." Also the "more or less adequate" implies critical considerations that were

suspended during the first draft.

In revising Stafford follows his first draft as he did his first impulses when they streamed through his mind. And this time he is asking, "How can I help this poem become what it is becoming?" New ideas come as he reads and he writes, follows hunches and the poem changes. "It's partly a question of whether or not it continues to interest me, whether or not it seems to be paying off for me to read it again and to jiggle it a little" (Stafford, 1982a, 24). The thrust of "revising outward" is not a polishing of initial impulses with preconceived standards or an editor's taste in mind. Revising is still exploring and following new ideas that interest him. He welcomes risk and admits to adding sections to poems while he is typing a final draft to send to a publisher. Here is the result of "revising outward" the lines that came to him when he was noticing his surroundings and thinking of family close and away, i.e. the published version:

Whispered into the Ground

When the wind ended and we came down
it was all grass. Some of us found
a way to the dirt--easy and rich.
When it rained, we grew, except

those of us caught up in leaves, not touching
earth, which always starts things.
Often we sent out our own
just as we'd done, floating that
wonderful wind that promised new land.

Here now spread low, flat on this
precious part of the world, we miss
those dreams--and the strange old places
we left behind. We quietly wait.
The wind keeps telling us something

we want to pass on to the world:
Even far things are real.
(Stafford, 1977, 25)

Let's examine how Stafford put this poem on the page and how the form fits the poem. "Whispered into the Ground" has two stanzas, divisions in aspects of time: the first in past tense and the second in present tense. The division emphasizes what the poem is doing in each stanza. The first is a remembering of arrival and sending off the new seeds. The second is an experience of rootedness, a quiet listening to what the wind has to say and passing it on. There is a "reverberation" here; in the first stanza new generations were passed on to new land and in the second stanza a message is being passed on to the world. The stanzas are like paragraphs, but there is one "element of poetry" not available to the prose writer: line endings.

Stafford's theory for line ending is not counting syllables or listening for a rhyme, it is recognizing opportunities, and when an opportunity becomes "insistent" another line begins. "It's that whenever I'm writing a line I know sooner or later I'm going to come to the edge of the paper and I begin to see certain opportunities. Here I might make a variance; there I might emphasize a certain word, give me a little suspense..." (*Crazy Horse*, 39). For example, the first line emphasizes "down" which echoes "ground" from the title. The second line ends in a little mystery, "found," and a curious reader goes on to discover what was found. The third line ends in "rich," which varies

the sound pattern of ground, down, and found. "Rich" also gives "dirt" and "easy" a desired connotation and the period gives a reader pause. The fourth line ends in "except," which signals that the thought is going to double back on itself. Stafford takes advantage of line endings and opportunities for "acrobatic swinging from line to line."

Stafford has a proclivity for sound and writes about how he gets "Whispered into the Ground" going. "It makes its move to emerge as sound--ground, down, found--but turns away from relying on such patterns and relaxes into dirt, caught, own, done, and slows to land" (Stafford, 1978, 65). A parallel variation or this pattern is also recognizable in the second stanza: "this," "miss," "place,"--changes to "behind," "wind," "world" and ends with "real." This loose pattern is reinforced with sounds that go beyond end, internal, and off-rhyme. It has the sounds of the wind blowing and subsiding and blowing again throughout the syllables. One could even speculate that the first word of the poem, "when," changed to "where" to get the sound of air into the wind. Stafford would probably protest, "I'm not that subtle, but the language is" (1983, 12-13).

The resulting rhythm--from line endings, sound, punctuation, and spacing--is another opportunity in language; another element of poetry naturally occurring in our language. Stafford listens to what a poem is doing, what it is about, rather than prosody. Though prosody is based on occurrences in our everyday speech, Stafford feels

it is too limited a device to lead a writer through the "... varied, seething pulse of all language, prose or poetry, you may opt for entering the pulse and guiding yourself in a way too various for metrical classification" (1969, 7-8). Stafford is more concerned with rhythm enhancing the contest than with fitting a predetermined pattern. He is more attuned to the way "Whispered into the Ground" breezes across the title, then moves in half lines as the seeds slide and catch, slide, catch, slide down through the grass. This rhythmic pattern is interrupted in the fourth line with "except" which lurches at the line's end. It is almost as if the poem itself struggles to get going again like the seeds "caught up in the leaves." The poem almost stops with the seeds at "earth," and though those seeds are stuck, the poem takes off again into a smoother rhythm with the seed's offspring. The first and last lines of the first stanza rhythmically frame the lines inside and bring a reader or hearer back to the beginning: the wind.

What is Stafford's writing process? It is an experiment in the open form. Some attempts are successful and the majority fizzle out as he follows the sequence of thoughts that stream through his mind at that moment in time. Writing is discovery, not a plan. Stafford enters an experience with language in which he explores and discovers something to say that never would have occurred to him had he not entered the process. Stafford claims he never gets "writer's block," he "lowers his standards" and writes on.

He claims he is too "ordinary" to ever run out of ideas. Now and again a sequence comes to him in which the thoughts and images reinforce each other and he recognizes a poem. He returns to these sequences because they interest him and the revisions are rewarding. As he "revises outward" he again writes what occurs to him. Even when he thinks the poem is finished, a new idea is welcomed. He believes that each poem's form is unique to that particular poem and it is possible to discover a form that is powerful for each poem, though he doesn't find it every time. The form is the way a poem is said or put on the page, and a poet takes advantage of opportunities available in stanzas and line endings that emphasize divisions (stanzas or words (line endings and punctuation). The rhythm of language depends on word choice, line endings, stanzas, and punctuation. The rhythm can enhance what the context is doing at that particular moment rather than following a preconceived pattern.

Finally, I will present Stafford's evaluative comments concerning his poems in the open form. He writes,

> ...genuine art comes not from hammering out something for posterity, but from making discoveries that are yours to be made because of your unique constitution and the unique encounter you have in experience.
>
> (Bunge, 114).

For Stafford the writing process is more vital than the product. He insists that he complete or "write through" his bad poems to insure that his sources are not stifled--his sources being that flow of thoughts that 'come" when he

writes. He implies that creeping suspicions, as to the quality of his work, do enter his mind as he is writing. Yet when they are negative he keeps on writing. "Who knows--I don't know when I'm working on a poem--some of the strangest things happen" (Stratton, 94).

Stafford studied writing at the University of Iowa. He says he thought that if he learned all the terminology and associated with writers he would be able to judge his work with confidence. "I hoped to be able to look at my writing and say 'yes' or 'no' instead of 'maybe yes' and 'maybe no.' It never got that way. I took my degree. I wrote, and now I look at my writing and still say, 'well'..."(Stafford, 1982a, 25).

Stafford's real critical decisions is whether he feels good enough about a poem to send it around to publishers. He admits to having written poems one afternoon and sending them to magazines the next morning. He also confesses to sending poems to over twenty editors before they were finally published (Stratton, 94-95). Feeling good enough about a poem to send it out is a personal feeling. Stafford is firm about allowing another person to correct a poem. "Anyone attempting to re-enter another's creative work is a violation of what art is all about" (1973, 6). He includes editors in this policy; they can or reject, but "...poetry is that kind of writing an editor doesn't touch" (Stafford, 1982, 16). He feels a poet must have two assumptions about editorial evaluation: the first is that a rejected piece is

not necessarily bad; the second is that an accepted piece is not necessarily good (Stafford, 1982a, 30). There is only one judge for a poet's poems and that is the poet "...who is led by the end of whatever golden string he happens to pick up, and sustained by the self--his own appreciative self--which judges him" (Stafford, 1978, 27). And for Stafford this judge decides which poems will be sent to publishers.

The most comprehensive evaluative statement Stafford makes is, "I believe good poetry has early and frequent verbal events, is consistently rewarding--that is, it comes through with worthy adventures that are promised or implied in its early parts" (1982b, 11). Return to his poem "Whispered into the Ground." The context or sequence unfolds as the wind ends and we come down. The poet withholds information as to who we are, but gives a clue, a description of where we are: "it was grass all around." In the third and fourth line he tells our needs: dirt and rain, more clues. We grow--ah, we know who we are! Yet there are other "verbal events" that enhance the context. The sound of the wind is in the title, yet we do not discover it is the wind whispering until the end of the last stanza. And if you return to those first impulses written on the morning Stafford began the poem, this discovery is not there. It was discovered during the process of writing.

Stafford's attitude toward writing does not readily lend itself to good or bad even while "revising outward." A

new idea coming to the poet changes the poem; it is not a correction as in spelling. It is an aesthetic adding-to, although this may mean taking away: less clinkers mean more poem. Stafford claims he cannot judge his work confidently, yet he does decide which poems to send to editors. He knows his judgment is not perfect, just as the poems are never perfect. A good poem captures as many of the bonuses living in everyday speech that the poet is capable of rendering at the moment of writing and revising. A discovery is made during the process of writing and that discovery is recorded in the context and reinforced by the elements of poetry.

William Stafford is one of the "wild cards," yet he is not an anarchist; he is a "wanderer" out of the halls of "how to" into the wilderness of discovery. His purpose is not to trash tradition but to go beyond it. He realizes that the rules he protests were once descriptions of what poets did in their practice of making poems. But when descriptions become prescriptions, poets like Stafford will take the practice of their art beyond those limitations.

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